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MSU-MSC First Football game

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FROM: BOB GILLULY
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RELEASE SUNDAY, NOV. 1

MISSOULA, MONTANA---Ever read of a football team whose coach left the sidelines to join the action on the field? Or of pre-game preparations which included depositing travel money for the visiting team with a railroad ticket agent? Or of a sport so new to Montana that newspaper accounts of the games had to be prefaced with a lengthy explanation of the rules?

All this, and more, occurred during the first Montana University-Montana State College football game. On the eve of the 58th meeting of the two clubs this Saturday in Bozeman, it seems appropriate to dig into the history books and see what happened at that first encounter. And judging from information taken from various sources--MSU yearbooks, the Montana Kaimin, and from sideline spectators--that first battle between the Grizzlies and Bobcats was a real corker.

"On Nov. 4 (1897) came the announcement that a regular intercollegiate game had been arranged with the Agricultural College of Bozeman, to be played at Missoula on Thanksgiving Day," is a quote taken from the MSU football record book. The author, now unknown, added that this would be the first time that two Montana institutions were matched in regular competition.

"Preparations for seating the crowd were made by erecting a stand to accommodate 200 people....the field was then located on the site of the present Milwaukee Depot in Missoula," the record book goes on. "By November 18th, more equipment was purchased, which made it possible to outfit 17 or 18 men. For the next 10 days, preparations were very active getting ready for the Thanksgiving contest with the Aggies.

"The money to pay the rail fare of the Bozeman team had to be deposited with the ticket agent at Missoula on Tuesday, the day before the Aggies left
(more)

Bozeman, and there was much scurrying around to raise the required amount of money on time.

"This being accomplished, attention was turned toward entertainment of the visitors. This was to take place at the residence of Judge Knowles on Wednesday.

"A reception committee met the visiting boys at the train, escorted them to their hotel, and later showed them around the city. They visited the University classrooms and laboratories, inspected the football grounds, and noted with interest the splended new grandstand that would seat 200 people. The reception at Judge Knowles' in the evening was a happy event and was attended by students, faculty and townspeople who exchanged felicitations with the visiting athletes."

Weather, which so often plagues the two Montana schools, proved no exception the following morning. The Montana Kaimin reported that several inches of snow fell during the night, and the Grizzlies (called the Varsity) were routed out of bed at an early hour to clear the field and mark the sidelines.

The Kaimin also remarks on a facet that no longer seems very evident when the two teams clash. "Crowd sentiment, of course, was strongly for the University. But it is a distinct pleasure to chronicle the splendid sportsmanship of the spectators, who loudly cheered every good play by the Bozeman boys." Contrast this to the wild student melee that occurred in 1958, and one can judge that students are considerably more partisan than they were in 1897.

"The play that day was fast and furious, fierce and fair," comments the long-forgotten reporter. "A spectacular moment was when Heyfron (of MSU) secured the ball, and dodging all opponents, made a long run for the goal until the ball was planted firmly between the goal posts. Unfortunately, however, in his wild rush he stepped outside the field of play and the count was not allowed.

(more)

"For the Bozeman team, the names of Reno Sayles, C. Flaherty, Patterson and Boyles stood out for effectiveness and grit. The Varsity (MSU) won, 18 to 6."

A final addendum occurs in the chronicle, and it is passed over so lightly that today's readers will come to the conclusion that it was not unusual in 1897. "Fred D. Smith, the University coach, played in this game," the reporter casually remarks near the end of his story.

Another interesting sidelight is the fact that the actual events of the game, except for Heyfron's long run, were not noted by the Kaimin reporter. Evidently in those days readers were more interested in being informed about the social activities and rather haphazard preparations for a contest than they were in reading of the game action.

This notion is borne out by a rather cryptic remark made earlier in the season, as noted in the record book. "The first game against the Tigers (a Missoula town team) was reported in the Daily Missoulian of Oct. 23, 1897, by the society reporter." This leads one to believe that the MSU-MSC grid game in 1897 was a definite social event, not a blood-and-thunder match between two gridiron titans.

To further delve into the background: "There were no more than 75 male students at the University that fall when Fred D. Smith, professor of chemistry, organized and coached the first Montana football team....interest in football was not wide-spread in this section. Hardly any of the students had ever played, AND MANY HAD NEVER EVEN SEEN A GAME.

After the first Grizzly encounter with the Tigers, the record book reports this reaction: "That first game attracted considerable local interest and was the topic of discussion among students and townspeople for many days. Very few people understood the rules of the game, and in the Missoulian of Oct. 30, a column was devoted to explanation of the rules."
(more)

That first game was 62 years and 56 games ago. A few other highlights, down through the years, include:

In 1898, the first field goal ever kicked in Montana occurred during the Grizzly-Bobcat tussle in Bozeman. Allard of Montana University did the trick. The State College gained revenge for the first time in 1899, when they scored their initial victory over the Silvertips. In 1900, the Grizzlies scheduled only one game all season--against the 'Cats. MSC won, 12-11.

The 79-0 win by the 1904 Grizzlies was the highest score ever recorded by either team in the long series. In 1909 the University started a string of victories that wasn't broken until 1929. The Grizzlies beat the Bobcats in 15 contests, with five ties, in that 20-year period.

More recent developments include moving the contest to Butte from 1926 through 1950. Alumni and officials of both schools felt that Butte was an ideal neutral point, and Naranche Stadium was the scene of many momentous clashes between the two institutions.

In 1933 the Grizzlies started another string of victories that went unbroken through World War II and up to 1947. That year, MSU placekicker Buck Prueningner went into the MSC game with a record of not having missed an extra point all season. Against the Bobcats he missed twice, and MSC broke the string with a 13-12 victory.

The series moved back to a home-and-home arrangement in 1951. In the first Grizzly-Bobcat encounter in 25 years at Gatton Field, the visiting University team scored a 38-0 victory.

The Bobcats had their revenge, however. They started their current record of victories in 1956, and have won three straight since then. Once again this season the 'Cats are heavy favorites to copy the mythical state championship.

Whatever the outcome, it will be a memorable 58th chapter in the long and historic series between the two Montana institutions.

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